

Factors Contributing or Hindering Sociocultural Adjustment of International Students and the Importance of Intercultural Training

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Abstract

This documentary research examined the sociocultural adjustment of international students in unfamiliar settings through a discussion of culture shock and adjustment problems before looking at intercultural training as a means of overcoming these problems. A body of empirical evidence and literature suggests that the adjustment problems experienced by international students are greatest at the beginning of their stay. The main factors contributing to problems with cross cultural adjustment are interaction with hosts, cultural distance, cultural identity, and cultural knowledge. In order to ease the sociocultural adjustment of international students, awareness of the significance of intercultural training should be raised among students, teachers and staff of universities in order to bridge the gap in cultural difference and build mutual understanding between hosts and sojourners. This article therefore suggests various intercultural training techniques to facilitate the sociocultural adjustment of international students.

Keywords: Culture shock, socio-cultural adjustment, intercultural training.

Introduction

Rapid developments in technology and telecommunication have given rise to an increase in world trade, the development of a global market place and the internationalisation of education. With the numbers of international students increasing each year, a great deal of research work has been carried out to look at the adjustment of these students to unfamiliar social and educational systems. This paper aims to discuss culture shock in terms of the cross-cultural experience of international students, to identify factors that contribute to successful or unsuccessful sociocultural adaptation of international students and to discuss the importance of intercultural training.

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Culture Shock, U-Curve Hypothesis and Cross-Cultural Adjustment

When people enter a new culture, they are likely to experience mental, physical or psychological problems. This is as true of international students as of anyone else. The differences experienced in climate, food, living conditions and standards, social values, ways of behaving, styles of learning, and modes of communication can be very stressful for many international students (Westwood and Barker, 1990). Furham and Tresize (1983) identify three problems that international students are likely to face: problems of living in a foreign culture (racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, separation reactions, dietary restrictions, financial stress, loneliness, etc.); problems of late adolescents/ young adults asserting their emotional and intellectual independence; and the academic problems associated with higher educational study. Empirical literature confirms the existence of these problems and reports that international students experience more sociocultural adaptation problems than their compatriots at home and that they experience more problems with communication and prejudice than do host students. These differences and problems can lead to increased stress, frustration, anger, fear or depression. These negative emotional reactions are the result of the loss of familiar, culture specific cues, often referred to as 'culture shock'.

Culture shock, a term initially introduced by Oberg (1960), is used to describe "phenomena ranging from mild irritability to deep psychological panic and crisis. Culture shock is associated with feelings of estrangement, anger, hostility, indecision, frustration, unhappiness, sadness, loneliness, homesickness, and even physical illness." (Brown, 1987, p. 128). Culture shock is most commonly viewed as a normal process of adaptation involving the symptoms mentioned above.

Brown (1987) describes culture shock as one of the four successive stages of emotional reactions associated with intercultural contact. The first stage is the period of excitement and euphoria over the newness of the surroundings. The second stage - culture shock - emerges as individuals feel the intrusion of more and more cultural differences into their own images of self and security. The third stage - culture stress - is the recovery in which some problems of

acculturation are solved while other problems continue for some time. The fourth stage represents near or full recovery, reflecting enjoyment of and functional competence in the new environment.

The four stages can be illustrated by using the U-curve hypothesis of cultural adjustment proposed by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1965). The U-curve hypothesis suggests that entry to a new cultural milieu tends to begin in a positive manner with the individual delighted by the exotic surroundings. Once this newness wears off and the affective, cognitive and behavioural contradictions of the foreign culture become more obvious, a person will become more disoriented. For many years, the U-curve hypothesis has assumed a central role in theory and research on cross-cultural transition and adjustment. Recently, the U-curve hypothesis has been challenged by the claim that, in contrast to the thesis that there is a period of euphoria, “sojourners and immigrants suffer the most severe adjustment problems at the initial stages of transition when the number of life changes is the highest and coping resources are likely to be at the lowest.” (Ward Bochner & Furnham, 2001, p. 81).

Research has been carried out to examine this proposition. Ward and colleagues (1998) conducted an investigation of sojourner adaptation with Japanese students in New Zealand. Students were asked to complete questionnaires which monitored depression and social difficulty at four periods of time: within twenty-four hours of arrival, and after four, six and twelve months in New Zealand. Contrary to the U-curve proposition, adjustment problems were greatest at entry point with a significant drop recorded at four months and only minor variations subsequently. Similar finding was reported in a study of thirteen international students enrolling at a graduate school of a university in the south of England (Brown & Holloway, 2008). The result showed that the overall level of stress among students was greater at the beginning of the stay. While it was true that students experienced feelings of excitement, these were far outweighed by the negative mood states of anxiety, depression and loneliness. As a result of these studies, the U-curve hypothesis, originally discussed with reference to sojourners’ psychological consequences of cross-cultural adjustment, has been expanded to include investigations into the relationship between behavioural and cognitive competence and cross-cultural

adjustment. This has led researchers to employ numerous variables as indices of adjustment in order to find a theoretical framework for the synthesis of theory and research on intercultural transition and adaptation. The indices of adjustment include variables such as “acceptance of the host culture, satisfaction, feelings of acceptance and coping with everyday activities, mood states and acquisition of culturally appropriate behaviour and skills.” (Searle & Ward, 1990). The variables are incorporated into two fundamental types of sojourner adjustment: psychological and sociocultural adjustment. These two dimensions form the core components of cross-cultural adjustment. While the former refers to psychological well-being or emotional satisfaction, the latter is related to the ability to ‘fit in’, to acquire culturally appropriate skills and to negotiate aspects of the host environment.

Psychological adjustment can best be understood within a stress and coping framework and is broadly affected by personality, life changes, coping styles and social support. Sociocultural adjustment, by contrast, can best be interpreted in terms of behaviour competence within a social learning context and is more strongly influenced by factors underpinning culture learning and social skills acquisition. Since these two dimensions are connected, it can be seen that psychological well-being is positively related to the acquisition and maintenance of culture specific knowledge and skills and the reverse of this is that social inadequacy or inappropriateness can lead to psychological isolation and distress and these two aspects can facilitate the sojourners’ adjustment to the new culture. As mentioned earlier, culture shock is the result of the absence or distortion of familiar environmental and social cues and since most difficulties occur in social situations and interactions, proponents of sociocultural adjustment believe that increasing the knowledge and skills of individuals concerning social interaction in the host culture will ease both the psychological and the sociocultural adjustment of the sojourners. This is also the case for international students. In order to reap the maximum benefits during their stay in the host country,

international students, who tend to have a clear goal for their education success and prepare to attain this goal in the new country, will need to establish interpersonal relations and communicate effectively with host national

community and learn appropriate ways of behaving conducting some social exchanges in a variety of interpersonal situations (Mak et al., 1999).

Giving these advantages, the focus of this paper will be on sociocultural adaptation.

Factors that Affect Sociocultural Adjustment

The rules and conventions that regulate interpersonal interactions vary across cultures. Individuals who share the same or similar social skills and etiquette can apply these skills to prevent communication breakdown or interpersonal friction. However, those newcomers who are not aware of the conventions of other societies are likely to have difficulty negotiating or understanding social encounters. Their culturally inappropriate behaviour can lead to misunderstanding and may cause offence. It is also likely to make them less effective in their personal and professional lives as well as more depressed, making it difficult to adjust to the new environment. The following section will discuss intercultural contact between the hosts and international students and some aspects of culture that are important to the sociocultural adjustment of international students.

Interaction with Hosts

Research on sociocultural adaptation presupposes that an inability to function or deal competently with the new environment is due to a lack of social skills and knowledge of the target culture. One way for sojourners to gain social skills is to develop interpersonal relationships with host-nationals. Hawes and Kealey (1981) noted that this intercultural interaction will involve developing a variety of social, linguistic and knowledge-based skills. These abilities and knowledge are developed through involvement with the host country community. Research on the social networks of international students shows the advantages of host national contact as a key to cross-cultural adjustment. Westwood and Barker (1990) found that international students who participated in peer-pairing programmes with host national students demonstrated better social adjustment and academic achievement than those who did not. Redmond and Bunyi (1993) found that having local friends was

linked to lower levels of stress. In contrast, an absence of intimate friendship with host nationals greatly obstructs students' adjustment process (Maudeni, 2001). All of these imply that if international students can successfully make friends with host nationals, they may encounter fewer problems than if they are left to cope with problems alone.

However, despite the benefits of host-national contact, studies consistently found that there is very little contact between the international students and host nationals. A study by Furnham and Bochner (1982) found that close links with British people accounted for only 18% of the friendships of foreign students in the United Kingdom compared with 39% and 38% of co-nationals and other-nationals respectively. Furnham and Alibhai's (1985) study of friendship networks of foreign students in London found that only 18% of international students identified host nationals as their close friends, compared with 54% and 28% of co-nationals and other-nationals respectively. In Neri and Ville's (2008) study, 56.7% of sample international students in an Australian university reported that most of their friends came from the same country of origin and that only a minority of students forged relationship with host students. Although these studies were conducted at different points of time, the results seem to suggest that international students are more likely to report that their best friends are co-nationals. Contrary to many claims about the preference for host national contact, the results from the above studies tend to confirm the view that "foreign students have limited (functional and utilitarian) contact with host nationals and may account for the fact that many overseas students return home disgruntled with the society in which they studied." (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). Although satisfactory social relationships with host nationals are important for international students, there is a clear disparity between the two parties. On the personality level, this could be explained by the degree of individual differences or personality traits. On the social level, it could be explained by the lack of cultural background based on the following variables.

Cultural Distance

Cultural distance refers to the subjective perception of differences between the home and host culture. A robust finding in the culture-contact

literature reveals that sojourners' adjustment and coping with difficulties increase with the distance between their culture of origin and that of host society. The greater the degree of cultural distance, the more likely an individual is to experience sociocultural adjustment problems. Likewise, cultural and/or ethnic similarity is associated with better sociocultural adjustment. According to Hofstede (1980) there are four dimensions of culture difference: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism and masculinity/femininity:

Power distance represents the degree to which members of a culture accept the institutions and organisations having power. Uncertainty avoidance is the degree to which members feel uncomfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. Individualist cultures place a higher emphasis on individual goals versus group goals than do collectivist cultures. Masculinity culture represents a preference for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material success while femininity culture represents a preference for relationships, modesty, caring for the weak, and the quality of life (Redmond, 2000).

These dimensions reflect different patterns of thinking, feeling and acting among culturally disparate individuals. Hofstede (1986) used the four dimensions to explain the difficulty that international students are likely to encounter, especially when expected to adjust to both social and educational systems of the host country. It would seem reasonable to expect that the problem will be potentially greater in intercultural relationships where the gap between these different cultures is wide. The greater the difference, the more one might expect problems in developing and maintaining relationships, negotiating social situations, meeting social needs, communicating effectively and adapting to the target culture. For example, students from a more powerful country might find it difficult to converse or argue with teachers from a less powerful country. Similarly, students from society with weak uncertainty avoidance might feel more comfortable with unstructured learning situations than those from the society with strong uncertainty avoidance who would expect more structured learning situations where precise objectives, detailed assignment and strict timetable are readily arranged for them. Furnham and Bochner

(1982) also investigated the relationship between cultural distance and social skills in foreign students by classifying countries of origin into three groups according to similarities in religion, language, and climate. Their results indicated that cultural distance and social difficulty are strongly related. From the study, individuals who are more culturally distant are likely to have fewer culturally appropriate skills for negotiating everyday situations. In order to reduce intercultural misunderstanding or communication breakdown due to cultural distance, sojourners should be trained to be aware of these differences.

Cultural Identity

An individual's sense of self is grounded in his or her cultural identity. Cultural identity refers to the ways people perceive and think about themselves and others as well as how they are viewed by other people. An understanding of one's own or others' cultural identity develops from birth and is shaped by the values and attitudes prevalent at home and in the surrounding community. According to Ward and Searle (1991), the impact of cultural identity on sojourner adjustment had largely arisen from work on ethnic identity and intergroup relations. Ethnic or cultural identification involves the recognition, categorisation or self-identification of oneself as a member of an ethnocultural group. This identification is particularly associated with such dimensions as nationality, mother tongue, ethnic community, age or gender. Identifying oneself with a particular ethnic culture gives one a sense of belonging and self-security. It also provides a person with access to social networks, which provide support and shared values and aspirations to the members of the group. These can help break down barriers and build a sense of trust among members of the community, which enables them to pass on their cultural traditions to future generations. Cultural identity becomes more complex and fluid over time as people develop allegiances to different groups within the broader society. Once these people engage in cross-cultural transition and relocation, it is likely that the intercultural contact will affect their identity, especially if there is a large disparity between the culture of origin and culture of contact. At this point, cultural identity will become more dynamic as "major aspects of identity are framed, negotiated, modified, confirmed, and challenged through communication and contact with others." (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p. 112).

Identity conflict can occur when situational circumstances demand the individual incorporate a new component of identity that is in conflict with an existing one. Individuals who make cross-cultural transitions are generally expected to conform to the normative values, attitudes, and behaviours of their host countries. If these prescribed commitments are inconsistent or incompatible with those of their culture of origin, conflict may ensue (Leong and Ward 2000).

For many international students, the new culture and language of the host country can be seen as a threat to their identity. This may result in students developing a strong sense of their identity. Stronger cultural identity is associated with sociocultural adjustment problems. For example, individuals who have a stronger cultural identity are less willing to adapt to the local customs and traditions of the other culture and, therefore, encounter more social difficulty. Hence, it is important for teachers and students from different cultures to develop an attitude of being willing to learn, understand, and appreciate the other culture without loss of their own status, role or cultural identity.

Cultural Knowledge

In order to survive and function in an unfamiliar setting, it is important for international students to acquire knowledge of the host culture. Redmond and Bunyi (1993) note that this will involve cultural and historical information, including that relating to customs and beliefs as well as, more difficult, to acquiring expertise in understanding how members of the host culture frame their worldview.

Brislin and Yoshida (1994) identify four types of knowledge that cross-cultural travellers should be aware of: immediate concerns, area-specific knowledge, culture-general knowledge and culture-specific knowledge. Immediate concerns involve general issues like visa issues, registration for classes, accommodation, health insurance and shopping. Simply speaking, these issues fulfil general basic human needs. Area-specific knowledge regards topics like history, geography, economics and politics and educational system. Knowledge in this area can be useful in gaining acceptance to the host culture as it is common that the host nationals are more inclined to befriend sojourners who have made some effort to be knowledgeable about the host culture than those

who have not. While the first two types of knowledge can be easily acquired by listening to old hands or reading extensively, the following two types of knowledge tend to be acquired through interactions with host nationals. Culture-general knowledge refers to specific theories or themes that are commonly encountered in cross-cultural interactions regardless of the culture involved. This can be very useful for newcomers during the initial stages of adaptation as it provides clues to the cause of adaptation difficulty.

Research has shown that there are consistent and systematic cultural differences in the way in which people send and receive information. Hence, when people from two different cultures meet, they will have difficulty in communicating with one another to the extent that their respective codes differ. For example, students from low-context cultures convey information directly and rely heavily on verbal communication while students from high-context culture convey limited information in coded messages. They are more apt to be influenced by situational cues and communicate in an indirect and often ambiguous fashion. Hence, when culturally disparate international students interact, they are likely to experience miscommunications and misunderstandings due to a mismatch in the degree of cultural knowledge. However, if the students are aware that it is common for intercultural contact to be occasionally stressful or unsuccessful and that the more they are exposed to the host culture, the more they will gradually acquire the knowledge they are seeking, they will be more relaxed and less self-critical. This is where intercultural training asserts its relevance by providing sojourners with some kind of systematic preparation and training to assist them in coping with intercultural contact.

Intercultural Training

Intercultural training refers to interventions aimed at increasing the knowledge and skills of individuals for effective interpersonal relations when they interact with individuals from cultures other than their own. Most good training programs incorporate at least four goals that are related to people's adjustment and effectiveness (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). The first goal is that trainees should be exposed to training materials or exercises that will increase their enjoyment and the benefits they receive. The second goal is that trainees

and host-nationals have positive interpersonal relationship. The third goal is that trainees should be given information that will help them achieve their goals. The fourth goal is that trainees should be trained to deal with the stress that arises from intercultural contact. When these goals are applied to international students, the training program should develop positive relationships between teachers and students and introduce information and skills that help students experience less stress. It should also communicate information and skills that are relevant to students' academic goals.

According to Kealey and Protheroe (1996), although there are various training techniques used in the intercultural training programs, most of them can be categorised under two broad sets of activities. The first set operates at the cognitive and affective levels of the trainees allowing them to acquire information about the host country and to understand the causes of others' behaviour. The most common procedure for the first set of training programs is information giving which includes the provision of practical information, area studies and cultural awareness. Techniques used include lectures, pamphlets, panel discussions and question and answer sessions.

The provision of practical information gives participants information about living conditions in the target culture including climate, food, social and religious customs, travel arrangements, accommodation, etc. The content of area studies emphasises the history, culture, social structure, economy and political behaviour of the host country. While both practical information and area studies help to increase the participants' impersonal facts and knowledge of the host culture by using the Memory principle of training, cultural awareness adds a more personally-relevant feeling for participants using the Understanding principle of training. The best known technique for conveying cultural awareness is the cultural assimilator. This technique permits participants to read description of intercultural interactions between culturally disparate individuals. Each incident terminates in embarrassment, misunderstanding or interpersonal hostility. The participants have to choose from among different options for managing the situations or a set of explanations of what went wrong and then receive a feedback if their choice is correct or wrong along with the suggestions for the most appropriate behaviour to deal with each incident. The cultural awareness training is more effective in terms of adjustment and interpersonal

relations than general area studies information about the host country. However, these intellectual-based training techniques are criticised on the ground that “it is one thing to be aware of cultural differences and possess knowledge of how to behave in another culture, it is another thing to be able to demonstrate those understanding in one’s behaviour overseas.” (Kealey & Protheroe, 1996, p. 153). Since people differ in their learning styles, some being more cognitive and some more experiential, a balanced approach is more appropriate.

Related to the previous statement, the second type of intercultural training consists of experiential activities that combine cognitive and behavioural techniques, hence employing the Doing principle of training. This approach is based on the theory that the assimilation of information is reinforced if accompanied by experience. The goal here is the acquisition of intercultural effectiveness skills, which are believed to enhance individuals’ ability to adjust overseas. Intercultural effectiveness skills can be gained via experiential learning methods such as behaviour contact, simulations and role-playing. For example, Johnson and Johnson (1994) propose an instructional model for role-based intercultural training in a group setting. This will be action orientated and experiential but non-threatening and will allow participants to rehearse in advance skills which will be required. The role-based approach provides opportunities for trainees to observe a variety of ways of dealing with intercultural situations to enable them to feel more comfortable as well as to gain new insights important for self- and cultural understanding.

In addition to providing students with social skills and cultural knowledge, attempts have been made to design embedded courses to support international students’ academic adjustment. It is undeniable that a lack of the study skills required in the host country university can hinder students’ adjustments to the extent that this can lead to a failure in academic performance. Hence, study skills such as note-taking, essay writing, and participating in the tutorial should be taken into consideration if international students are to become effective in their studies. Peelo and Luxon (2007) designed and developed an embedded content course to help Chinese students studying in a UK university. The course included an understanding of the academic skills required to study effectively as well as practice of transferable skills necessary for independent learning, such as critical reading, essay writing, summarizing

and other activities necessary for studying in a particular academic environment. McClure (2007) suggested that not only international students should be sensitized in cross-cultural training, but host university staff and academia should also be made aware of the international aspects of their course. Hence, a cross-cultural training programme for teachers or supervisors could assist in raising awareness of the cultural and attitudinal constructs that both students and teachers bring to their learning environment.

In order to provide the most effective study experience for international students, a variety of opportunities such as orientation and training upon arrival in the new culture, ongoing training and evaluation of the training programs should be made available by universities. Orientation programmes can serve as preliminary courses in order for students to gain immediate knowledge about the host country or to get a rough idea of what they are going to encounter in the new environment. Ongoing training should be initiated when students have made contact with the host nationals or when they have experienced intercultural misunderstanding. Training can guide them towards appropriate behaviour, suitable for different social situations. Evaluation courses should be used to monitor international students' sociocultural adjustment. Training that takes place in the host national context provides students with a more genuine sense of the social situations they are likely to face than training conducted at home. Another benefit is the better understanding of what international students have to go through during cross-cultural transition. Intercultural training will benefit not only international students' adaptation to the new environment, but also schools and universities especially when international students feel that their problems have been taken care of and that the school or universities care for their well-being. They will be more likely to spread good reports of the institutions and hence help to bring more students and greater income to these institutions. With the globalisation of intercultural communication and the proliferation of intercultural education, cultural sensitivities and interpersonal skills are important to international students. Undertaking training for the development of intercultural competence will enhance international students' awareness of the impact of culture differences on cross-cultural contact, equip them with strategic social skills and facilitate their adjustment to the new environment.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper is on the sociocultural adjustment of international students. It has attempted to identify the cultural factors that can cause difficulties in making sociocultural adjustments and suggests that intercultural training can help international students acquire intercultural competence at the cognitive, affective, and, more important, behavioural levels. Although there is now sufficient evidence that international students who cross cultures would benefit from some kind of systematic preparation and training to assist them in coping with intercultural contact, there is a large number of students entering culture contact who receive no formal training, or only a perfunctory amount of training which is subsequently often found to be insufficient. Common reasons for a lack of intercultural training are its cost and difficulties in implementing and delivering training courses. In the case of overseas students, those sponsored by their governments or universities often do receive some training in the home country, but it is usually delivered by non-specialists and therefore tends to lack a firm theoretical and empirical base and it is often arranged as pre-departure training. Although pre-departure training might enhance both the trainee's immediate knowledge of the host country and some interpersonal skills, it is almost impossible to be confident that this training will improve students' performance overseas. In other cases, many international students do not appreciate the potential benefits of intercultural training until they are faced with the considerable differences in what constitute social competencies. In an era when international students are regarded as an economic resource to be exploited, schools or universities in the receiving countries should consider enhancing the effectiveness of international students' cross-cultural transition by investing in intercultural training as a means of facilitating successful cross-cultural interactions and reducing culture shock. Likewise, organizations sponsoring international study, governmental or otherwise, are urged to consider developing pre-study cross-cultural training courses and the feasibility of instituting such courses is an area where further study would certainly reap rewards.

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